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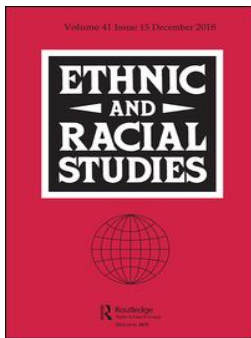
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# Is intersectional racial justice organizing possible? Confronting generic intersectionality

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## ABSTRACT

This article empirically charts how a discursive construction of the separation of race and racial justice organizing, and “intersectionality” serves to uphold white supremacy and efface intersectional marginalization among people of colour. Undertaking the first study of how UK policymakers and practitioners in equality organizations understand and operationalize “intersectionality”, it maps “generic intersectionality”, which is delivered to benefit “all”. Through empirical examples, its detrimental effects for racial and intersectional justice are demonstrated. First, it is used as a rationale for a relinquishment of a focus on race/racism; *racial justice organizations are constructed as uniquely incapable of doing intersectionality*. Second, “neutral”, “unspecific” representatives are constructed as those capable of knowing about and doing intersectionality. *Intersectionally marginalized people are constituted as non-credible knowers and doers of intersectionality*. Generic intersectionality is a novel use of intersectionality, which gives a new name to liberal sameness and constructs its beneficiaries as a monolithic, white “everyone”.

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**KEYWORDS** Intersectionality; racial justice; NGOs; equality policy; white supremacy; culture wars

## Introduction

The term “intersectionality”, applied by Kimberlé Crenshaw to Black women’s theorizing of racialized sexism and gendered racism (Amos et al. 1984; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 1990; Anthias 1993; Mirza 1997), has been steadily growing in popularity across academia, popular culture, social movements, the third sector and policymaking. As to the latter, at Westminster an “Equality Hub” recently formed in the Cabinet Office will, apparently, deal with intersectionality (Government Equalities Office 2019). For a government that “stands unequivocally against” the Critical Race Theory from which intersectionality emerged (Trilling 2020), this is perhaps yet more evidence of what

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Sirma Bilge has termed intersectionality's "whitening" (Bilge 2013), its appropriation by white feminism and by what in the UK goes by Equality, Diversity and Inclusion. In the USA, intersectionality's popularity has generated "backlash" (May 2015; Mohdin 2020), while in the UK, perhaps, there is a different story: one of governments comprised of parties along the political spectrum increasingly instrumentalizing intersectionality, and giving it competing meanings to suit their interests at different junctures (Christoffersen, 2021). In spite of its popularity, intersectionality presents an ontological challenge that cannot be overstated to equality policy and practice, since they remain largely siloed into single identity/issue sub-sectors structured from the understanding that equality groups are homogenously and singularly marginalized. Against the backdrop of its popularity driven by public discourse as well as the UK's multi-strand equality policy context enshrined in the Equality Act 2010, this article is based on research which asked: (i) what intersectionality means to equality policymakers and third sector practitioners in racial justice, feminist, disability rights, LGBTI rights, refugee organizations and intersectional combinations, in both England and Scotland; and (ii) how, and in whose interests, it is used.

Intersectionality theory often includes mutual constitution of inequalities (Collins 1990), different levels of analysis (Crenshaw 1991), relationality (Collins and Bilge 2016) and focus on those who are intersectionally marginalized (in particular Black women and women of colour) (Crenshaw 1989, 1991). Yet as the term "intersectionality" has grown in popularity and use, its meaning is a ground of contestation (Alexander-Floyd 2012; Bilge 2013; Jordan-Zachery 2013). In short, several authors argue that, in Vivian M. May's words, "though intersectionality is widely known, acclaimed, and applied, it is often construed in ways that depoliticize, undercut, or even violate its most basic premises" (May 2015, i). In Europe, a tendency has been observed and named, "to find valuable a 'purified' intersectionality, quarantined from its exposure to race" (Tomlinson 2013, 266; Lewis 2013). Indeed, focus on race within intersectionality canons has been found to be less prevalent in Europe than in the USA (Mügge 2018).

In policy and practice, due to both the relative novelty of attempts to operationalize it and the workings of gendered racism, it is ripe for co-optation, in the form of distancing it from both its radical origins in Black and women of colour's activism and social justice aims. While Black women can be viewed as key subjects of intersectionality (Jordan-Zachery 2013), it is being controversially operationalized for a more generalized "equality" and applied to a range of marginalized social groups (Christoffersen 2019) by academics, policymakers and practitioners alike. Particularly in UK equality policy, it is typically used in an unspecified way, across up to the nine "protected characteristics" named in the Equality Act 2010: age, disability, gender re-assignment (i.e. transgender status), marriage or civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity,

race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation (Christoffersen 2019). Ange-Marie Hancock argues that intersectionality's analytic/ontological project, to reconstitute relationships between categories of difference, is inseparable from its "project to render visible and remediable previously invisible, unaddressed material effects of the sociopolitical location of Black women or women of color" (Hancock 2016, 33). In different sites of practice, depending on whether race, "a central analytic element that cannot be jettisoned without inflicting fatal violence on the integrity of intersectionality's intellectual project" (Hancock 2016, 13), continues to be a central focus, intersectionality's contemporary uses may variously be found to be an extended application of intersectionality or an effacement of Black women, women of colour and the intersection of race and gender (Christoffersen 2019). Yet Jennifer Nash has more recently argued that in a US context, Black feminist critique of intersectionality's appropriation can fall into proprietary narratives which engender a defensiveness which serves to stall Black feminist theorizing, and proposed "letting go" (Nash 2019).

Nash's argument is compelling, and yet it remains important to carefully examine dynamics of appropriation in a European context similarly characterized by antiblackness, which disavows and displaces race (Lewis 2013; Mügge 2018). It also remains important to examine these dynamics in a particular UK context, which consistently fails to act on long-accumulated bodies of evidence of systemic racism and antiblackness more specifically (Meer 2020), and in which most uses of intersectionality in equality policy fail to meaningfully engage with race and race/gender as central social organizing logics and categories of intersectionality theory (Christoffersen 2019). Black feminists theorize the ways in which Black women, "as both representation and embodied, sentient being[s]" (Lewis 2017, 117), are effaced, discursively and materially made absent across many sites; meanings and uses of intersectionality in policy and practice are sites of this epistemological and material erasure of Black women, as both knowledge producers and actors in these social worlds, as well as of their resistance to it (in other words, perhaps, their "presencing") (Lewis 2017).

There has been little research on intersectionality's operationalization in established third sector equality organizations or coalitions/networks of organizations, particularly in the UK context (with some exceptions: Sudbury 1998; Bassel and Emejulu 2017). Moreover, there is a dearth of research internationally specifically exploring *how* intersectionality is understood. Based on fieldwork conducted primarily with three local networks of third sector equality organizations, I developed a typology of five competing concepts of intersectionality circulating in UK third sector equality organizing, each with different implications for intersectionally marginalized groups and intersectional justice (Christoffersen, 2021). In this article, I focus on one, "generic intersectionality", wherein there is little focus on any equality

strand<sup>1</sup> in particular, and similar work is delivered to benefit “all”. I argue that this concept emerged in contexts of: (i) “cohesion”, (ii) a multi-strand equality policy framework including a Scottish duty to “mainstream” equality and (iii) austerity. I focus on generic intersectionality because, while many have noted the ways in which intersectionality may be reduced to and used synonymously with “diversity” (e.g. May 2015; Nash 2019), generic intersectionality is a distinctive, insidious and novel use of intersectionality, which instrumentalizes it to give a new name to liberal sameness and constructs its beneficiaries as a monolithic, white “everyone”.

Moreover, generic intersectionality has particularly detrimental effects for racial and intersectional justice, which I demonstrate through empirical examples. First, it is used as a rationale for a relinquishment of a focus on race/racism; in this discourse, *racial justice organizations are constructed as uniquely incapable of doing intersectionality*. Second, within a generic intersectionality discourse, there is a preference for “neutral”, “unspecific” representatives, constructed as the only ones capable of knowing about and doing intersectionality. *Intersectionally marginalized people (and organizations of them) are thus constituted as non-credible knowers and doers of intersectionality*.

This has important policy and practice implications not least because, since this research was conducted, a range of new resourcing from both public and private sources has been dedicated to racial justice work in the light of contemporary Black Lives Matter movements (in the UK, in spite of Westminster’s current pursuit of a “white nationalist” agenda (Siddique 2020)). Within a generic intersectionality discourse where intersectionality is constructed in exclusive association with whiteness, this new racial justice work would be constructed as incapable of being “intersectional”, to the detriment of both racial justice organizing, which is thus discursively re-siloed away from intersectionality and work on other equality strands of gender, disability and LGBTI, and intersectional justice itself. If the opportunity for progress engendered by BLM is not to be squandered and past failings are not to be repeated, we need to squarely interrogate the determinants and effects of generic intersectionality, namely: the discursive construction of the separation of race and racial justice organizing on the one hand and intersectionality on the other serves the dual purpose of upholding white supremacy and effacing intersectional marginalization among people of colour.

## Equality policy and the equality third sector

The UK’s internationally unique unification of equality legislation and architecture creates both opportunities and challenges for intersectionality’s

operationalization (Solanke 2011; Gedalof 2013; Hankivsky, de Merich, and Christoffersen 2019; Christoffersen 2019).

Beginning in the late 1990s, equality law and policy in the UK began to move from a purely anti-discrimination approach addressed piecemeal from the mid-1960s onwards to a more proactive one placing positive duties on government to promote equality of opportunity. This move was heavily influenced by the recognition of institutional racism in the public sector following the Macpherson inquiry (Macpherson 1999) into the murder of Stephen Lawrence and by European Union directives (themselves influenced by UK race equality policy (Meer 2017)). The Equality Act 2010 was developed in light of a comprehensive review of equality legislation initiated by the Labour government. It covers England, Scotland and Wales and brings together disparate anti-discrimination legislation with stated aims to achieve greater simplicity and parity. In spite of lobbying from third sector organizations, some groups (notably refugees) are not specifically recognized in the Act. The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC), established in 2007, replaced separate commissions on disability, gender and race. The Act places proactive obligations to eliminate discrimination and harassment, advance equality of opportunity and promote good relations for people with “protected characteristics” on more than 40,000 public bodies (including central government departments; local governments; and health, education, policing and transport bodies) through the public sector equality duty (PSED). The PSED replaced separate positive duties for race, disability and gender that were in effect from 2001, 2006 and 2007, respectively (Christoffersen 2019).

The Equality Act 2010 and its predecessor legislation across race, disability and gender can be understood as the products of contentious claims-making, for rights and from refusals of exclusion from the welfare state, by a range of actors from intersecting marginalized groups, among which sits the equality third sector, comprising voluntary and community as well as social enterprise organizations that have emerged because of inequality related to markers of identity, and aim to increase equality. This sector plays a key and at times overlooked role in knowledge production and equality policymaking and implementation, as well as being engaged in more autonomous work to increase equality. Equality third sector organizations have been campaigning for legislative and policy change at local, national and UK-wide levels, and delivering activity and increasingly, services aimed at increasing equality for many decades. While I take the “equality sector”, which has histories of self-organizing around shared experiences of discrimination, as subject, there are vital distinctions between sub-sectors within it along lines of experience of intersectional privilege and marginalization. Sub-sectors have distinct histories and complexities, and within them, there has often been conflict concerning the extent of independence vs. co-option vis-à-vis the state. Some organizations and practitioners in the UK equality sector were

“doing” intersectionality long before it became a buzzword among policy-makers (among intersectional organizations marginal and under-resourced compared with single strand ones, for instance, the Black women’s sector), though this has not always been named or considered as such. Equality organizations, which have been largely focussed on single issues/identities, do variously: campaigning and policy engagement, community development/engagement and service delivery. While they are often problematically conflated,<sup>2</sup> I distinguish the *third sector* from the *grassroots* (grassroots organizations, social movements, individual activists and campaigners); for my purposes, third sector organizations are either formally constituted or funded, and usually both.

## Methodology

I explored how equality third sector organizations and equality policymakers understand and operationalize intersectionality through case studies of intersectionality’s conceptualization and use within networks of equality organizations. Networks were selected because of the relational orientation of intersectionality, and because for this reason, coalition working is a consistent theme in the literature on intersectionality in practice (Collins and Bilge 2016). The networks all aim broadly at cooperation to address inequality and advance equality. They were selected because they include different types of equality organizations, explicitly take an intersectional approach and have a policy intermediary, representative role. The first network seeks to advance equality, promote human rights and address poverty; the second to enable cross-sector cooperation on equality; and the third and largest, to advance equality, respond to discrimination and aim for social justice. The cases are balanced across geography, length of establishment, size and length of time spent applying intersectionality. Research participants worked for the networks themselves and their member organizations (racial justice, women’s, disability rights, LGBTI rights, refugee, faith, Deaf, trans and intersectional).

The case studies were conducted within an intersectional, feminist and antiracist theoretical framework. Intersectionality has itself been described as an “epistemological orientation” and “ontological project” (May 2015, 34), characterized by attention to context, positionality and experience in knowledge production, and viewing multiplicity, including the simultaneity and contingency of power, oppression and privilege, as logical rather than incoherent (May 2015; Hancock 2016). Within this antiracist feminist frame, white supremacy is considered a central structure of social life (intersected with others) (Mills 2017). This is an important framework to identify, since it does not necessarily follow from uses of “intersectional feminist”.



In light of debates in intersectionality studies about white appropriation of intersectionality (Bilge 2013; Jordan-Zachery 2013; Lewis 2013) from Black/women of colour/indigenous feminism, as a white woman, I will contextualize what motivated me to conduct this research (Christoffersen 2018): my key point of entry to this project was my background as a practitioner in my sector of interest, specifically in a Black-led LGBTQ community development organization<sup>3</sup> committed to working intersectionally. My practitioner background enabled me to recruit and gain access to networks. In some respects, in order to understand more about white supremacy, my racialization as white was advantageous. Some of what white research participants said to me about race, people of colour and racial justice organizations explored in this article, would likely not have been said to me if I had not been white. However, it is also possible (though not essentially determined) (Gunaratnam 2003) that some participants of colour would have said more or said differently if I were also, and that others from a more connected racialized social position would have “seen more” than I did in these interactions. I built points of connectivity (Gunaratnam 2003) with participants by explicitly acknowledging both similarities as well as racialized and other differences.

The complexity of both intersectionality and the social world of the equality third sector means that one methodological approach or method on its own was insufficient to research the relationship between them, and to do so “intersectionally”. My methodology drew principally on ethnography and participatory research. For 1.5 years, like network members, I attended semi-regular meetings and events and participated in network email lists. The research, therefore, has particular characteristics of ethnography: at times my role as a researcher was ambiguous, and I influenced the social worlds through my participation, and thus participant narratives. Conducting ethnography allowed me to build relationships with participants over time, which is important to establish trust when conducting qualitative research across differences (Edwards 1990). Networks were involved in the development of research questions and design. Some participants conducted data collection and recruitment. Within the case studies, I employed four methods:

Method	Number
In-depth, semi-structured interviews	41 in total <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 39 with representatives of organizations from 13 equality sub-sectors/intersectional combinations and network staff</li> <li>• 2 with policymakers</li> </ul>
Focus groups	1 in total
Participant observation	9 network meetings and events
Documentary analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 24 national and UK level equality policy documents</li> <li>• 42 (total) documents pertaining to the case study equality networks</li> </ul>

Individuals, organizations, networks and cities are anonymized; all names used are pseudonyms. I held several sessions to share and co-construct findings with participants, assessing knowledge claims through dialogue (Collins 1990).

I will now turn to explore the emergence and effects of generic intersectionality through two empirical examples.

### ***Constructing racial justice organizations as incapable of doing intersectionality***

“Generic intersectionality” is a concept of intersectionality, wherein there is no focus, or very little focus, on any equality strand or strands in particular (Christoffersen 2021). The same or similar work is addressed at and delivered to benefit “everybody”, not only or even mainly marginalized equality groups. From this perspective, working on issues that affect only the most disadvantaged is constructed as being *not intersectional*. Its emergence at the local level is closely related to austerity: it is much less expensive to do generic intersectionality than to do, respectively, race, gender, disability, religion/belief and LGBTI equality (Christoffersen 2020).

One equality network, in particular, employed an application of generic intersectionality. Network organizer Leanne described their intersectional approach, which amounted to treating everyone the same.

We weren't grouping people by characteristic ... it was just [undertaking the same work with everyone] ... the idea was for that to be intersectional and also inclusive and accessible ... We didn't go to a group of people with disabilities [sic] and say, you know, “Well, talk to us about your disability?” We ... went to a group of ... [Black and minority ethnic] BME young carers, and none of them mentioned their BME, or young carer identity. That's not how they're defined in the world and that was really nice.

On the one hand, it may be viewed as positive practice not to expect people to be (solely) defined by their equality strand/s; on the other hand, it seems problematic (and perhaps of little analytical significance) to celebrate the fact that people of colour talked about equality without mentioning race. The responses given will also be influenced by who was doing the asking, i.e. white practitioners.

The meaning of intersectionality as generic equality was found among policymakers in some contexts and the overlap between policymakers, the public sector and third sectors; I did not find it in more grassroots (unfunded) organizations. In other words, this understanding was limited to more powerful actors. It was prevalent in networks which work across competing discourses of identity-based “equality” and socioeconomic “inequality” (the latter constructed as white, in racialized discourses of the “white working class” and the “Left Behind” (Bhambra 2017)).

In terms of the individual positionality of participants, this meaning was less prevalent among those with marginalized aspects of identity and more prevalent among those with privileged ones. It was only associated with white participants (the significance of which will be highlighted in the following discussions). Those who held this understanding mainly reported learning about intersectionality in academic environments.

A generic approach to *equality* was perceived by some practitioners and scholars in the context of the Equality Act and its mainstreaming duty in Scotland (Campbell 2014), while I have identified how *intersectionality* is mobilized to be constitutive with this approach (Christoffersen 2021; Christoffersen 2020). While recognizing it particularly among public sector colleagues, most participants strongly rejected this concept of intersectionality, viewing it as a co-option of intersectionality which is funder-driven and serves to devalue more productive concepts of intersectionality (Christoffersen 2021) as well as intersectional organizations (constituted around the intersection of two or more equality strands, e.g. BME women of faith organizations). They also perceived generic intersectionality as closely related to policy reduction of “equality” to “inequality” and poverty.

Since it treats everyone the same, work on specific inequalities is inconsistent with generic intersectionality. Yet within a generic understanding of it, intersectionality is also mobilized to displace specific attention to racial justice *in particular*, in spite of intersectionality’s origins in theorizing the synthesis of race, class and gender. Generic intersectionality is used as a rationale for a relinquishment of a focus on race/racism; in this discourse, *racial justice organizations are constructed as uniquely incapable of doing intersectionality*.

At the UK and national levels, meanings of intersectionality as “generic” emerged in contexts of “cohesion”, i.e. policy fear of racialized minority faiths and divestment from concepts of institutional racism, and the multi-strand equality policy framework represented by the Equality Act. To construct this meaning, intersectionality needed to be emptied of its association with race and race/gender; ideally, racial justice needed to be dispensed with altogether. To this end, across cities in both England and Scotland, I observed a unique pressure on organizations dedicated to racial justice to relinquish their specific focus on race, i.e. to broaden their areas of work.

From the late 1990s/early 2000s, accelerating following social uprisings of predominantly minority ethnic people in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley, there was a policy shift away from “multiculturalism” towards “cohesion” and “integration” (Afridi and Warmington 2009; Meer and Modood 2014),<sup>4</sup> i.e. assimilation (Lewis 2005). As part of this transition, there was a government policy against “single group” funding (Cantle 2001), later successfully challenged by a key Black<sup>5</sup> feminist organization, Southall Black Sisters. This policy meant that for a time, organizations led by and for particular minority

ethnic communities were not entitled to government funding, as this was constructed as counterproductive to cohesion and integration. Therefore, some equality organizations were forced to place less emphasis on working with their specific target communities (Afridi and Warmington 2009).

In 2010, the Communities Secretary, Labour MP John Denham, stated that it was “time to move on from the one-dimensional race agenda” (Craig 2011, 381), in the context of the Equality Act 2010, which entrenched a move to a united, multiple equalities or “multi-strand” policy framework. Here, Aziz, director of a racial justice organization in Scotland, explains the concerns that they had about the Act in the racial justice sector, which viewed legislation on race as being comparatively strong:

One of the issues with [the Equality Act] and all the ... race organisations ... did have some reservations about the legislation and it's come true in terms of race. What was said at that time is they wanted to bring everybody together so everybody got the same service and all that. The race dealing community was very fearful that the 1971 Act [*sic*] then the amendment act was very strong. It was a strong piece of legislation. We as organisations or practitioners, we were very, very clear that the new legislation should bring the rest to par rather than dumb down the race and it happened. You can see now ... race is nowhere to be seen and where race used to get resources, nobody gets resources now.

Fears of dilution with the Equality Act 2010 seem to have come to some fruition as far as race is concerned. In both England and Scotland, since the establishment of the EHRC which replaced the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE), race equality councils have become less widespread. Many of these councils, first constituted under early race (“community relations”) legislation, have closed due to lack of funding which used to come from the CRE. Of those that are left, many now work in a way where race equality is not the focus (e.g. through rebranding to “equality councils” rather than race equality councils). In England, this is not uniform. For those for which this is the case, the Equality Act was cited by participants as the reason for this rebranding. In Scotland, however, pressure was more acute, reportedly coming in the form of a directive from the Scottish government for race equality councils to relinquish a dedication to race, and to change their names, as a condition of funding (interview with policymaker, 2018). Moreover, here previous research found that following the closure of the CRE, the EHRC (when it still had funds to disburse to equality organizations) did not fund any racial justice organizations in 2009/2010, while in the preceding financial year, the race sector had received the largest share of funding, and other strand sectors continued to be funded (Campbell 2014). A director of a former race equality council explained,

EHRC came along which then totally there was no funding ... name-wise because there was no core funding, a lot of them had to close down ... We

have to move with the times. Whether we liked it or not. So, therefore the name changes and also our way of working changed.

The finding that race equality organizations experienced various pressures to relinquish a focus on race is very significant, since other strand organizations/sectors did not report the same pressure to lose the focus on their strand, nor did I observe it. In other words, there seems to have been a clear double standard at play, wherein in the new multi-strand policy context and amidst intersectionality's growing popularity, race equality organizations were expected to immediately begin working on other equality areas, a standard that white-led and predominantly white equality sectors were not held to in the same way. One reason for this discrepancy is that by policymakers and funders, and equality organizations and practitioners in other sectors also, race equality itself, and the racial justice sector, are constructed as being very specific in a way that, in comparison, other (predominantly white, and white-led) single strand sectors are not (women's, disability, LGBTI). In other words, institutional racism is at work, and whiteness is reconstructed as normative, at the same time that institutional racism is constructed as passé. The equality areas that other sectors work in, always already constructed as white, are concurrently by necessity also (re)constructed as separate from race. This in turn effaces the overlapping groups of women of colour, and disabled and LGBTI people of colour.

I found that, further, intersectionality (as generic equality) was used as a rationale for this relinquishment of a focus on race and racism. Moreover, since race is constructed as very specific, and intersectionality as generic, *racial justice organizations are constructed as uniquely incapable of doing intersectionality*, compared with other equality sectors. The following quote is a reflection on these organizations at the time my research was conducted, a good eight years following name changes and broadening of work into "equality" organizations among the former race equality councils.

I don't think they could generally even now call themselves [intersectional] ... organisations. Peter, Policymaker.

Racial justice organizations were viewed as incapable of intersectionality not only by policymakers but by other (white) practitioners employing a generic concept of intersectionality: one similarly stated that they did not feel that a particular organization was intersectional; though it had changed its name to a "regional" equality council, it was still really doing race (not "intersectionality"); after a pause, they said "that obviously is important ..." (field notes, 2018). This is in spite of the fact that some race equality councils had dedicated work concerning the intersection of race and gender, even before this directive to change focus came about.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the policymaker quoted above reflected that they did so, but nevertheless felt that

these organizations were incapable of intersectionality. Here, intersectionality is conceptualized generically, firmly distanced from race/gender and women of colour. Intersectionality is used generically to delegitimize work on race specifically, and in so doing, it reconstructs race as separate from other strand work, reinforcing siloed thinking.

In sum, there was a perceived hierarchy of grounds before the Equality Act, with race secondary to other inequalities (notably gender, constructed as white). Thereafter, in contexts of cohesion and the Equality Act, “intersectionality” has come to be appropriated and instrumentalized to give a new name to generic approaches to equality. These approaches uniquely target racial justice organizing as passé in a “postracial” discourse which works to uphold white supremacy through discursive consignment of racism to the past, and thus denial of the contemporary significance of race (Goldberg 2015), and as incapable of incorporating intersectionality. Racial justice organizing is constructed as the past, and (generic) intersectionality as the present and future.

Yet since the events described here, in some ways, the “one-dimensional race agenda” has re-emerged. In Scotland, there is some limited attention to (non-generic) intersectionality within the Race Equality Framework and Action Plan (Christoffersen 2019). In England, however, among prominent figures in the “race disparity” initiatives, intersectionality was constructed as a luxury that might come later (conversation with policy-maker, 2018); there are no clear intersectionality advocates among them nor among the more recently established (and subsequently discredited) Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities; and key leaders are men. The construction of this meaning of intersectionality has important material and discursive effects for racial justice organizing, and developing uses of “intersectionality” at Westminster require careful interrogation as to its generic quality.

In discourses of generic intersectionality, racial justice organizations may find themselves forced to stop focussing on race in order to “progress” intersectionality; whether or not they do so to remain competitive with other equality organizations, they are constructed as uniquely incapable of doing intersectionality as compared with the white women’s, disability and LGBTI sectors. In a context where intersectionality is flavour of the month by some local governments and the Scottish government, racial justice organizations are further disadvantaged vis-à-vis white-led organizations. Discursively, this constructs intersectionality in exclusive association with the racial discourse of whiteness (Leonardo 2002), imbuing it with connotations of being “progressive” (intersectional), serving ultimately to uphold and bolster white supremacy, and to efface intersectional marginalization among people of colour.

### **Constructing the desirability of “neutral” intersectionality representatives**

This second example shows how within a generic intersectionality discourse, there is a preference for “neutral”, “unspecific” representatives, who are constructed as the only ones really capable of knowing about and doing intersectionality. *Intersectionally marginalized people (and organizations of them) are thus constituted as non-credible knowers and doers of intersectionality.*

The equality network that employed generic intersectionality fell particularly short of being “representative” of intersectionally marginalized people, as compared with the other two case study networks. During my fieldwork, it had low levels of engagement overall (relatively few members, few of whom attended meetings, or participated in consultation exercises between equality communities and local government). In my field notes, I reflected that the few people at meetings seemed to know one another (field notes, 2017). Network staff described aspirations to be member-led as “not really panning out”, so decisions ultimately on behalf of whole communities were made by a small number of staff:

We are struggling a little bit for it to be really member-led, so we are tending to direct a little bit more than we would like. Leanne, Network organizer.

However, in the knowledge that it was not member-led, the network nevertheless maintained a desire to retain its position as representing marginalized equality communities in the city.

In that city, there was one formal equality representative in community planning structures; this role had mainly been held by white men. One network meeting that I participated in/observed was dominated by this white male representative, who is also employed in the equality sector. This role was initially envisioned to be held by someone acting in a voluntary (i.e. unpaid) capacity (someone with “lived experience” of in/equalities, notwithstanding the considerable power imbalance that would have existed between this person and all others occupying roles within this structure), but this has not happened. His dominance at the meeting was commented on by others whom I went on to interview, in addition to being observed in my field notes (2017):

Like that meeting that went—well, we went along and we listened ... most of the time, it was [him] that was doing all the talking ... I thought to myself these events have to be inspiring, they have to be invigorating, so you come out of the event thinking, “Right.” Rather than, “Oh, God.” Christopher, network member.

It was difficult to imagine this meeting as an inclusive space for equality sector practitioners of colour in particular.

Among my participants, the fact that this role was held by a white man was not always, however, problematized. In fact, by some equality practitioners, one such positioned person occupying the role was looked on favourably, since they were viewed as “unspecific” or “unbiased” as compared with marginalized others. In other words, in contrast to valuing representation of intersectionally marginalized people, participants with a generic concept of intersectionality appeared to think it is preferable if those whom they perceive as more “neutral” people do the representing in the interests of intersectionality. The network organizer felt that if symbolic equality roles were held by those from single-issue organizations, they would not be able to have an “intersectional” view – in the context of this role being held by a white man, and other organizations being led by and for equality communities. I took the implication to be that from their perspective and within this understanding of intersectionality, the current (white male) representative was preferred (field notes, 2018). Some seemed to doubt the abilities of (some particular) others to think beyond their own experience and identity, to feel that siloed thinking is so engrained that it cannot be overcome, and that intersectionality stands a better chance of being practised by more “generic” people and organizations. This is a view also shared by some funders and policymakers.

Here, a figure is being constructed as neutral, as generic, as capable of representing all others, as most capable of intersectionality. This figure is from those groups constructed as the majority, in other words from those groups which are dominant: white and British, non-disabled, cisgender, not too young and not too old, and not too religious. This figure is constructed as capable of knowing about and doing intersectionality, while “those groups who are subject to misrepresentation find that this serves to make them less credible knowledge claimants ... the misrecognition of their social identity works to undermine their position as knowers” (McConkey 2004, 203). The intersectional subjects of Black woman (Jordan-Zachery 2013) and woman of colour are effaced and implicitly constructed as self-interested, specific and ungeneralisable, and untrustworthy.

This constructed ideal figure is also from a “generic” or a multi-strand *organization*. Here it is felt that single strand organizations are not able to overcome their silos, which is a valid concern (Christoffersen 2021). Yet, intersectional organizations are effaced within this, and their knowledge is doubly constructed as too niche and specific to be able to know about and do intersectionality (conceptualized generically).

However, many in the equality sector, comprised of organizations led by and for their target group, have a low opinion of generic organizations. Here, David, director of an LGBTI organization in England, explains:



There's what I call ... generic ... organisations which are people who are not specialists but dabble in different communities. Sometimes there's some resentment against them because they're seen as organisations that are not from the community but they come in and take community money.

In the same city discussed above, in the former equality policy environment, the council hosted and administered strand-specific equality networks, including a race equality network. For reasons partly due to the new multi-strand equality policy context and largely owing to diminished resources, the strand-specific equality networks were dissolved.

The council also funded a former race equality council, at the time a "regional", multi-strand equality organization, for strategic equality input and infrastructure. Although now multi-strand because of policy pressure described above, regional equality councils have tended to retain a strong focus on race as compared with other multi-strand organizations which lack this history – likely owing to the continued substantial representation of BME antiracist advocates among the staff and in governance structures.

However, in order to establish a new local equality network which was one of my cases, a network intended by the council to be "intersectional" from the outset, funding was removed from this multi-strand equality organization, with a history and key focus on race. In other words, *in the name of intersectionality, funding was removed from race equality to go towards generic "intersectional" equality; funding was removed from a BME-led and predominantly BME organization (in part, on the basis that it was incapable of sufficient intersectionality) and given to a white-led and predominantly white organization (constructed as being capable of, indeed best positioned to do, intersectionality)*. Here again, intersectionality is given the meaning of "generic", namely: where no equality strand is addressed in particular, and equality is constructed as being for and about "everyone" (white people) rather than marginalized groups.

In spite of its mandate to represent all equality communities in the city, in my field notes, I observed the whiteness of the equality network (space, meetings, events, member organizations) developed by the organization constructed as being capable of intersectionality. But this may or may not even be problematized in a discourse, where race is constructed as specific and non-intersectional (qua generic).

As Anya, practitioner in a racial justice organization observed in a different context,

Some of them [public sector partners] don't really get what [intersectionality] is. They get it confused with sort of cross strand approaches, or sometimes even worse they get it confused with blanket approaches, like "We need to be mindful of intersectionality so we'd better not focus on race"! [laughs] and you go, What!? Stop it.

Organizers of this network acknowledged that engagement from BME groups in the network was low, and mentioned the possibility of doing targeted work around this; at the time of writing, this had not happened, due to alternative structures emerging (explored below).

In this context, practitioners working on racial justice in some capacity felt that race had been marginalized, as Raka, director, BME women of faith organization explained.

All the tokenism and everything like that seems to be going out of the window as well now. It's kind of like at the bare faced level of we've got rid of the race—we're an equality ... based thing—and that works across all six [*sic*] strands ... Now, it's just an equality network. Race has fallen off the agenda.

This perspective is particularly noteworthy, since according to some literature on intersectionality and public policy (e.g. Hankivsky and Christoffersen 2011), it would be organizations such as this that might be expected to benefit from the establishment of a multi-strand network, as opposed to single strand networks. In a single strand network model, intersectional organizations may (i) feel compelled to participate in more than one network (i.e. a race and a women's network), which would take twice the resource to do; and (ii) feel that their issues and experiences are compartmentalized, and inadequately addressed. However, this is precisely opposite to the view of this organization, within which some were supporters of the new equality network at its inception, but changed their perspective when they felt that race was marginalized by the network's generic approach to equality and to intersectionality.

## Resisting generic intersectionality

Generic approaches to equality and intersectionality engender resistance from women of colour. Some of those who felt that race had been marginalized from policy agendas with both the dissolution of the council-administered race equality forum and within the new equality network itself established a new racial justice forum. This forum brought together practitioners from different organizations to focus on strategic engagement with key policymakers. It was not funded by the council or other funders, so although those involved worked in the sector, the time they spent on this was outwith their jobs. Participants described it being made up predominantly of women of colour. This forum arose as a direct response to what they perceived as the marginalization of race in the funded, “intersectional” equality network, as Emma, practitioner in a racial justice organization explained.

That's part of the reason that the [forum] was set up. It's because they felt that the council had taken funding from lots of different organisations and just created this body that was apparently meant to address all protected

characteristics ... we did feel that [the new “intersectional” network] wasn’t looking at race.

Raka agreed,

There was quite a discussion amongst quite a few people that have been involved in [racial justice work] for many, many years ... that there is nothing now to challenge [the] council about what’s happening around the race agenda.

When they did not feel included in or represented by the new network operating with a generic concept of intersectionality, intersectionally marginalized women of colour organized to represent the interests of communities of colour. Given the lack of funding, however, there was some concern in participant narratives that this forum was not sustainable. Yet it is highly unlikely to be funded by the council, since the council seeks generic intersectionality as value for money in the context of austerity and has funded the development of the new network accordingly. At the time of research, participants were trying to gain funding for the forum:

People think that everybody wants to be paid all the time but sometimes these ... organisations do need somebody that’s paid ... if everything’s ... piecemeal, we’ll never have the same clout as something that’s as organised from a base.

## **Representation and opposing understandings of intersectionality**

I have identified that there are competing understandings of intersectionality in circulation among research participants, as well as in wider academia and popular (feminist) culture; that, in fact, intersectionality is imbued with meanings that are so opposed to one another, that its utility at all in this context is a matter for debate. Some concepts of intersectionality are particularly opposing.

The first of these is intersectionality as generic equality, firmly distanced from the “specificity” of race, and serving to reconstruct whiteness as normative, and efface Black woman as both figure or intersectional subject and embodied being (Lewis 2017). Equality networks employing this meaning see themselves as representing everybody:

We’re representing all the protected characteristics ... and not one is more important than the other. We just wanted to sort of pre-empt any issues around that with working with organisations that have a sole focus, and will naturally see that as the most important, but we needed everyone to kind of get together and be on a level. Leanne, Network organizer.

Moreover, here “intersectionality” itself represents or signifies everybody.

Within a generic understanding, it is either not deemed relevant who is doing the representing, since the aim is to represent “everyone”; *or*, it is

felt preferable to have figures constructed as occupying “neutral” social positions as representatives. This understanding of intersectionality is firmly present in the construction of racial justice organizations as incapable of intersectionality and in the policy decision to remove funding from one such organization in order to fund “intersectionality”. It is in sharp contrast to intersectionality’s focus on Black women, women of colour and those who are most disadvantaged.

Importantly, all non-Black feminist organizations have an interest in dislodging intersectionality from race/gender, and all white-led organizations (i.e. all other equality sectors except the racial justice sector) have an interest in dissociating intersectionality from race and race/gender, in contexts where intersectionality is becoming the current “common sense” term to use in relation to in/equality, expected and desired by funders. Indeed, its growing popularity in policy both furthers and depends upon this dissociation. One influential white-led organization, in particular, was perfectly aware of intersectionality’s origins, but, frustrated with its continued association with them, purposefully, and seemingly successfully sought to extend its meanings in policy and in the sector. Those participants employing generic intersectionality, namely white participants and white-led organizations, certainly use intersectionality without any meaningful attention to race, Black women or women of colour. Generic intersectionality enables the creation of a positive construction of a white identity as the “intersectional” equality professional representing “everybody”, which, though they would not deny historical racism, consistent with the postracial (Goldberg 2015), it is discursively assigned to the past. This subject position is therefore relieved of responsibilities to meaningfully engage with concepts of privilege and complicity, or enduring structures of white supremacy. Without the post-racial, this concept of intersectionality and positive identity construction become untenable.

Clearly, there is a pressing need to challenge white-led organizations and white practitioners and policymakers who do not recognize white supremacy, engage race and race/gender in their work which they describe as intersectionality, arising not solely from intersectionality’s origins, but from commitments to racial and intersectional justice and the empirical positions of race and race/gender as fundamental organizing logics of and social divisions producing inequality in the UK.

An alternative applied concept of intersectionality, as work of and with specific intersectionally marginalized groups (Christoffersen 2021), can be described in opposing terms to generic intersectionality. Emma felt that the alternative race equality forum was intersectional, insofar as it was predominantly women of colour involved.

Most of the network members are Black women ... from that perspective [intersectionality] comes up a lot ... because of structural issues it's looking at structural issues on race. There's an implied intersectionality but nothing's explicit.

It is clear that this understanding of intersectionality is directly opposed to *generic* intersectionality. This distinction is important because in the city where these stories unfolded, generic intersectionality has much more power than other concepts.

## Conclusions

Generic intersectionality strips intersectionality of any attention to power and marginality. It is employed in the interests of maintaining white supremacy, gendered racism and racialized sexism and to rationalize a lack of public sector investment in equality work (especially racial justice work) in the context of austerity politics. Through ostensibly treating everyone the same, in practice, it privileges and extends whiteness.

Within a generic concept of it, intersectionality is mobilized in order to *displace* specific focus on racial justice. This is significant not only in light of academic debates (re)locating intersectionality in the intersection of race/gender, with women of colour key subjects (e.g. Hancock 2016). It resonates with critiques of the erasure of Black women and race in intersectionality research (e.g. Alexander-Floyd 2012), or in other words, white appropriation of/colonisation (Tomlinson 2013) of intersectionality, indicating similar erasures in equality policy and practice. The use of intersectionality to theorize social divisions other than those positioning women of colour is controversial among intersectionality theorists, and in wider popular (Black) feminist culture. Yet, in the equality policy and third sector environments in England and Scotland, there is little detectable awareness of these debates among powerful actors. Among these, intersectionality tends to be used in an unspecified way, across the up to nine protected characteristics which are named in the Equality Act 2010 (Christoffersen 2019), or, in the case of generic intersectionality, an empty, and white, category of "everyone".

Some applied concepts of intersectionality that I identified (Christoffersen 2021) are consistent with US-based literature revealing where intersectionality is used apolitically as synonymous with diversity (e.g. May 2015; Nash 2019), yet I also depart from this in further identifying very *generic* uses of intersectionality. Whereas "diversity" may connote difference in individualized and singular ways and may be used in the US context, in particular, to mean racial or ethnic diversity, within generic intersectionality, difference is flattened, and intersectionality becomes a new word for equality as liberal sameness. The existence of this concept of intersectionality is a notable cause for concern, since while scholars may reasonably dismiss it as not being

intersectionality as they know it, it goes much further than uses of intersectionality as institutionalization of diversity in advancing insidious inequalities, especially along racial lines: it gives a new name to equality as liberal sameness for the current moment and future. Having quietly achieved common sense status in some policy contexts, on its own terms it has been operationalized to effect.

Within a discourse of generic intersectionality, working on issues that affect only the most intersectionally disadvantaged is successfully constructed as being niche, not value for money, siloed and divisive, and *not actually intersectional*. Generic intersectionality is used to rationalize a wielding of power against the racial justice sector, in the form of material divestment and effacement per se (forcing organizations to change their missions entirely, and removing funding from them even when they comply). Racial justice organizations have been pressured to engage other inequalities in a way that other (white-led) equality sectors have not and are constructed as not intersectional since an assumption is already present that they will not or cannot: they are pressured to do something which they are already presumed to be incapable of doing or unwilling to do. At work here are implicit and familiar constructions of racial justice organizations (led by people of colour) as being *more* sexist, *more* homophobic, *more* ableist and *more* conservatively religious than white-led organizations. This displacement of racial justice from intersectionality serves to strengthen constructed associations of other inequalities and the equality sectors working on them with whiteness. Racial justice organizations are constructed as uniquely incapable of doing intersectionality, with real material consequences for those organizations, while white-led organizations benefit from this construction, since they are by necessity simultaneously constructed as *uniquely capable* of intersectionality. Whiteness is reconstructed as normative and given a “progressive” intersectional quality.

Many practitioners recognize the threat of this understanding of intersectionality. In contexts where this meaning is dominant, not only is the viability of racial justice work under threat, but all work of intersectional organizations, and that employing more productive concepts of intersectionality by other organizations is as well. This includes in particular organizations led by and for Black women and women of colour, which like racial justice organizations, are constructed as incapable of doing intersectionality by their equality sector “colleagues”. Intersectionally marginalized, misrecognized and misrepresented people (and organizations of them) are thus constituted as non-credible knowers about and doers of intersectionality, unable to think beyond their own experience and identities. Women of colour are constructed as niche, specific and non-credible knowers about intersectionality, a violent effacement which is both discursive and material. I found subtle but unmistakable indications of belief in the desirability of representation in the name

of intersectionality to be “neutral”, “non-specific” and “unbiased”, both implicitly and explicitly constructed as those occupying dominant social positions, constructed as the only ones capable of knowing about and doing intersectionality, and as representing all others; and not representing a specific equality “interest” or organization, but rather, “everybody”.

In a broader context of epistemic injustice which devalues intersectionally marginalized women of colour as non-credible knowers, in response and resistance to generic intersectionality, they organize to represent *themselves* and people of colour more broadly, rather than placing faith in single strand equality organizations or generic equality networks to do so; they declare themselves present (Lewis 2017).

Generic intersectionality represents, perhaps, intersectionality’s appropriation for the supposed interests of a constructed monolithic white working class (in the UK, all imagined to reside in the north of England where, indeed, the Cabinet Office Equality Hub which will deal with intersectionality is being moved (Truss 2020)). Developing uses of “intersectionality” in equality policy discourse require careful attention as to its generic quality. Meanwhile, during ongoing austerity newly funded racial justice work in the light of BLM has the challenging task ahead of negotiating paternalistic calls for it to be more generically “intersectional” (amidst racist presumptions that it cannot) on the one hand, and on the other, serving the interests of women and other intersectionally marginalized people of colour.

## Notes

1. “Strand” is common terminology among policymakers and practitioners for equality area, e.g. race equality, gender, disability, etc. “Single strand” or “strand specific” is used to mean single issue. I also use “equality group” or “equality community”, by which I mean, marginal groups pertaining to the strand, i.e. women, disabled people, etc.
2. For instance, in feminist political science, the term “activist” is at times problematically applied to those who are *employed* and *paid* by equality (women’s) organizations, and the term “movement” is used to encompass both third sector and the grassroots, thereby obscuring conflicting interests of each.
3. The organization developed purposefully to be Black majority led among its trustees during my time there, which is distinct from a “Black LGBTQ organization” since permanent staff were usually majority white and our priority target communities were the overlapping groups of Black, Deaf, disabled and female LGBTQ people.
4. While its use as a term declined, as a set of practices multiculturalism’s enduring legacy is more complex (Meer and Modood 2014).
5. Here used in the political sense following the organization’s own self-description.
6. I do not wish to romanticize the affected racial justice organizations as beacons of intersectional thought and practice. To do so would be to perpetuate the erasure of Black women and women of colour which intersectionality responds

to. By and large, this has been a male-dominated sector (this is oft-repeated among participants, yet I question whether this sector really is or has been *more* male-dominated than other sectors, and what else might be at work in these pronouncements). Therefore, self-organized, autonomous organizations led by and for Black women and women of colour have long existed.

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